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ABSTRACT

In academic, scientific and professional communities, individuals request reprints of published articles from the authors of those articles. To investigate the effect of the method of communication, letter or postcard, with or without a personal handwritten note, on request compliance rate and response latency, two separate studies, in 1979 and in 1981, were conducted. The 1979 study contained 120 psychological reprint requests, 30 per condition, while the 1981 study contained 200 requests, 50 per condition. Replies were recorded for a 30 day period in the first study, with a compliance rate of 54 percent, and for a 60 day period in the second study, with a compliance rate of 76 percent. An analysis of results showed that the compliance rate was not affected by the form of communication. However, in the 1979 study, adding a personal note to either a letter or postcard delayed the latency response. In the 1981 study, an interaction occurred between the variables, with the longest latencies occurring for letters with personal notes and for postcards without notes. Both authors and individuals requesting reprints should consider these findings in terms of professional behavior, cost-benefits, and timelines of information. (BL)

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Requesting Reprints:

Tests of Two Different Strategies

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, 1983. Correspondence should be addressed to: K. W. Jacobs, Ph.D., Department of Psychology, Loyola University, New Orleans, LA 70118.

Abstract

Two separate studies were conducted, one in 1979 and one in 1981, to investigate factors that might influence the compliance with requests for reprints of articles appearing in psychological journals. The manipulated independent variables in each study were whether the request was made by postcard or letter and whether the request contained or did not contain a personal handwritten note. In each study, reprint requests were held until they could be randomly assigned to one of these four treatment conditions and all mailed at the same time. In the first study, 120 reprint requests were mailed (30 per condition); in the second study, 200 reprint requests were mailed (50 per condition). In the first study the compliance rate was 54%, while the second study had a compliance rate of 76%. The rate with which the requests were honored (the compliance rate) was not effected by the experimental conditions in either study. However, in each study, the speed with which the requests were honored (response latency) was significantly effected by these manipulations. In the first study, adding a personal note significantly delayed responding, regardless of whether a card or letter was used. In the second study, a significant interaction was observed, with the longest latencies occurring to letters with personal notes and postcards without notes.

Requesting Reprints:

Tests of Two Different Strategies

It is common practice in the academic, scientific, and professional communities for individuals to request reprints of published articles from the authors of those articles. This is such a common practice in Psychology that the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, Second Edition (APA, 1974) indicates that standard footnotes "should: designate the address of the author to whom requests for reprints or inquiries should be sent" (p. 68). Most Psychology journals, and the journals in many other disciplines, carry such footnotes either at the bottom of the first page or at the end of the article. There is even one commercial firm that sells a specially prepared postcard to be used to request reprints, although it is aimed specifically toward users in the "hard" sciences.

Despite the extent to which this practice is carried out, there does not appear to be any empirical research on this practice. It is pure speculation to estimate the number of reprint requests that are made each year or to look at who are making these requests. It seems reasonable that a relatively small number of Psychologists are requesting a relatively large number of reprints, and that some Psychologists hardly ever request reprints. It is equally unclear whether the requested reprints are used by researchers to obtain background materials, by academicians in updating courses, or whether they serve a more general role in the acquisition of information. There is simply no normative research to describe the reprint requesting activities of Psychologists.

Equally lacking is research into the behaviors of the authors who are

requested to provide reprints. Some authors seem to ignore all such requests, even when the requests are repeated in different ways. Other authors have taken the position that reprints should be sold rather than given as a professional courtesy, and sometimes sold at prices which obviously contain a margin for profit. The most common situation, however, seems to be one of simply complying with the requests as long as reprints are available, and then responding with a note that supplies of reprints have been exhausted. Very seldom do authors exhibit any more active response to the requests; personally written notes accompanying the reprints are a very rare exception. However, lacking any empirical work in this area, even these conclusions are very impressionistic.

It is reasonable to think that if someone goes to the trouble to send a request for a reprint, they would like to have the request honored. Any such request is an investment in time and money, and presumably there is some intended use for the reprint. Under these assumptions, individuals requesting reprints would be expected to want to maximize their chances of obtaining the reprints, while minimizing the costs involved. Needless to say, there is no hard research on which to base any strategy decisions.

The two most common strategies are to either send a postcard or a letter requesting the reprint, with postcards being used more frequently. The postcard is certainly the more economical of these two approaches. Postal rates for a card (currently 13¢) compare favorably with the letter rate (currently 20¢). In terms of costs for materials, cards certainly cost less than letters and envelopes. Also, less time is required to actually complete a card than a letter, regardless of whether this is simply a matter

of filling in preprinted blanks or typing the complete request. However, it has not been determined that postcards are the most efficacious way of obtaining a reprint. If postcard requests were honored less often than letter requests, any financial gains would be obviated.

An additional strategy that could be employed to increase the probability of a request being honored, is the addition of a brief hand-written note to the request. This would require very little additional time, and obviously would not increase the cost of the request. It could be hypothesized that this strategy could significantly increase the rate with which such requests are honored, or the speed with which they are honored.

There are any number of other strategies that could be employed in attempts to increase the probability of such requests being honored or to increase the speed with which such requests are acted upon. It seems, however, that the two strategies most frequently used for these purposes are to use a letter in place of the traditional card and to add a personal note to the request. An experiment was conducted in 1979 to test the effects of these two variables on compliance rate and response latency. Due to the unexpected findings in that study, the experiment was replicated in 1981. This paper presents the results of both studies.

Method

In each study, articles which the first author desired as reprints were identified and the title page of each article was photocopied in order to have an accurate record of the author, title, and mailing address for reprints. Colleagues were asked to provide assistance in identifying reprints that they would like to have that could be included in the same study. Two limitations were imposed on the reprints that could be requested: the authors must have a mailing address in the continental United States and the article must have appeared in a major Psychology journal. Due to the biases of the researcher and colleagues, the journals that were represented in the final sample of reprints requested were: American Psychologist, Biofeedback and Self Regulation, Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, Physiology and Behavior, Psychological Bulletin, and Psychological Record. For each study, these potential reprint requests were collected over approximately a one year period until apparently adequate sample sizes were obtained.

These potential reprint requests were then randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions: preprinted postcards, preprinted postcards with personal notes added, form letters, or form letters with personal notes added. This produced a fully randomized 2x2 factorial design. The first study employed a total of 120 reprint requests, with 30 requests per cell; the second study employed a total of 200 requests, with 50 requests per cell.

Attention was given to making all experimental conditions as similar as possible, except for the manipulated independent variables. The same block of return address information appeared on each form of request, and each printed

text contained the same information. The same signature block and mailing address was printed on each request. When hand-written notes were added to the requests, these brief notes were the same across both forms of the requests. These added notes usually took the form of "Thank You", "Thank you for your consideration", or "Your assistance is appreciated".

All reprint requests in the first study were mailed on the same Friday early in 1979. All reprint requests in the second study were mailed on the same Friday in January of 1981.

As each reprint was received, its receipt date was noted on the reprint and this information was transcribed onto the original photocopy that served to generate the request. If the reprint was actually desired by a colleague, it was then distributed at that time. In the first study, this data was recorded for a 30 day period; in the second study this data collection was continued for 60 days.

Results

Of the 120 requests that were sent in the first study, a total of 65 produced replies within the 30 day period, yielding an overall compliance rate of 54 percent. Of the 200 requests that were sent in the second study, a total of 152 produced replies within the 60 day period, yielding an overall compliance rate of 76 percent. It is unclear whether the higher compliance rate in the second study was due to the longer data collection period. In the first study it is believed that only one reprint was received during the 30 days following formal data collection. However, the mean

response latency in the second study was 21.16 days, as compared to only 13.72 days in the first study. Response latency is reported in detail below.

Chi square analyses were used in each study to test whether the numbers of reprints received were effected by either of the experimental conditions. In both of these analyses the resulting chi square values were less than 1.00 and were non-significant. It is therefore concluded that compliance rate is uneffected by the two strategies that were tested in these studies.

A different picture emerges, however, when the latency variable is examined. In each study, two-way (2x2) factorial analyses of variance were performed on the latency variable (the number of elapsed days between the request being mailed and the reprint being received). These analyses were based on the reprints that were actually received. In each analysis, latency was in some way significantly effected by the nature of the requests (see Table 1).

Analysis of latency data in the first study produced a significant main effect for personalized versus non-personalized responses ($F = 4.53$, with 1 and 61 df's, $p < .05$). The non-personalized requests were responded to significantly faster than the personalized requests, with a mean latency of 12.20 days for non-personalized requests and a mean latency of 15.38 days for the personalized requests. The other F ratios in this 2x2 analysis were not significant It was the disbelief in this finding that prompted the second study.

Analysis of latency data in the second study produced a significant interaction between the two manipulated variables ($F = 4.83$, with 1 and 148 df's, $p < .05$); neither main effect was itself significant. While this

interaction is somewhat difficult to explain, it is somewhat consistent with the previous finding. The longest latencies occurred to letters with personal notes added and to cards without personal notes; the shortest latencies occurred to letters without personal notes and to cards with personal notes. The individual cell means for these four conditions are shown in Table 1.

The additional variables of number of reprints received per response and whether the author added some form of personal note to the reprint are also reflected in Table 1. Overall means of more than one reprint per request resulted because several authors supplied reprints of several related articles and because other authors occassionally sent the same reprint on different dates. Due to the relatively small number of actual occurrances of either event, this variable was not subjected to analysis. Personal notes added by the author were tabulated if any additional form of written correspondence or note was added to the reprint. In several cases authors added notes such as "Thank you for requesting this reprint" or "with the compliments of the author". Such occurrances were also too uncommon to merit any form of statistical analysis.

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insert table 1

Discussion

The major conclusion from these studies seems to be that requests for reprints are complied with to the same extent regardless of whether a card or letter is used to request the reprint, and regardless of whether or not a personal note is added to the request. At this point it looks very much like some authors honor requests for reprints and some do not, and that behavior is not going to be changed by either of the strategies employed in these studies. In terms of cost-benefit analysis, reprint requests should probably be made by postcards, because they are less expensive without having any adverse effect on compliance rate. As a result of these findings, I have discontinued my more expensive practice of using a form letter to request reprints.

However, if the person requesting the reprint is in a particular hurry to receive the reprint, some attention should be given to the manner in which the request is made. In the first study the difference between conditions was in the order of three days, in the second study the possible gain was in the order of about five days. When time is a crucial factor, and the request is being made by postcard, there is some evidence that adding a personal note will expedite the request, and there is some evidence that adding personal notes will generally slow down the process. If the request is made by use of a form letter, these findings generally suggest that personal notes should not be added to the letter. Certainly, these findings with respect to latency of compliance are not as clear-cut as would be desired.

From the time this study was first conceived, it was recognized that the methodology to be employed deserved serious consideration with respect to ethical issues. The actual subjects in these studies were the authors who received reprint requests, and they were participating without being told that a study was being conducted and without being given an opportunity to withdraw from the study. However, it seems clear in this instance that such information would have biased the results that were obtained to such an extent that any findings would have been worthless. It was concluded that the potential benefits to everyone involved in reprint activities outweighed this cost. The requesting of reprints, and the subsequent behaviors of authors receiving those requests, are normal on-going activities involved in the communication process. It is suggested that the only deviation from that process was the addition of a structure that would allow meaningful results to be obtained. It is doubtful, for example, that the addition of this structure actually increased the number of reprint requests that were originated during the period covered by these studies.

It seems that psychologists seldom examine their own behavior, or use their peers as subjects in research. These two studies have attempted to empirically examine one aspect of behavior common to psychologists. In addition to providing some practical guidelines for requesting reprints, they also provide some small insights into our own behavior.

Table 1

Tabulation of Responses

	Letter Personal	Letter Form	Card Personal	Card Form	Total
Study I					
Number Sent	30	30	30	30	120
Percent Responding	60%	53%	43%	60%	54%
Mean Latency (days)	15.72	12.75	14.92	11.72	13.72
Reprints / Request	1.67	1.00	1.69	1.00	1.18
Personal Notes (%)	17%	6%	0%	0%	6%
Study II					
Number Sent	50	50	50	50	200
Percent Responding	76%	80%	66%	82%	76%
Mean Latency (days)	23.34	19.83	17.76	23.20	21.16
Reprints / Request	1.13	1.20	1.33	1.66	1.33
Personal Notes (%)	11%	5%	6%	10%	8%